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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 000415

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: MEDIA REACTION, FEBRUARY 28-MARCH 6

11. SUMMARY: During the week of February 28-March 6, Kazakhstani media gravitated away from specific discussions on the Manas base issue in favor of broader analyses of Central Asia's strategic orientation toward Russia and the United States. The Department's recently released 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices received modest attention in government and opposition newspapers. Meanwhile, media reported some back-and-forth between government and opposition about Internet freedom, as well as recent critical statements on minority religious groups. END SUMMARY.

WHICH WAY TO LOOK?

12. While there was a noticeable decline in editorial pieces on the Manas base issue and its potential fallout, Kazakhstani media continued to ruminate about the region's perceived east-versus-west balancing act. The "Central Asia Monitor," a pro-government weekly, weighed the question of whether Central Asian states should cooperate with NATO, painting the choice as one between "turning completely" toward the United States and NATO or using "Eastern bargaining" to extract American investments while maintaining solid relations with Russia and China. The article asserted that NATO, rather than the CSTO or SCO, is the only organization able to contain the spillover threat posed by the conflict in Afghanistan. Central Asian states "should care less" about what others say and continue to seek cooperative relations with the West. The article stated that the United States and NATO have proposed "profitable deals" and are "willing to pay a reasonable price" for such cooperation.

13. Pro-government daily "Aikyn" weighed the geopolitical situation of Central Asia amid conditions of a global economic recession. The article focused on the need to unite as Central Asian states, and that all find themselves subject to U.S. and Russian attempts to "use the economic situation for political purposes to strengthen their position in the region."

HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT (HRR) REACTION: NOT MUCH OF A SPLASH... YET

14. The Department's recently released 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices received modest coverage during the week, mostly focused on factual statements of the report's content rather than editorializing about its impact. (NOTE: This may in part be due to the fact that the report has only been distributed in English; Russian and Kazakh translations are in process. END NOTE.)

¶15. A wire report from state-supported Interfax-Kazakhstan noted that human rights remain "a cause of concern for the U.S. administration" despite some improvements in the Central Asian states, and cited serious problems with "basic rights, including freedom of association, expression, and religion" that persist in all five states. Kazakhstan-specific references in the article included Internet blockages of opposition websites, freedom of religion coming "under attack" in parliament, and continued use of child labor.

¶16. Radio Azattyk, the local RFE/RL broadcaster, summarized the report with slightly more demonstrative language. The piece highlighted points made in the report about core political rights, including the "severely restricted" right of citizens to change their government or criticize their leadership and the concentration of power in the President's hands.

WHODUNIT CONTINUES ON INTERNET BLOCKAGES

¶17. Media also reported on the ongoing back-and-forth between opposition news outlets and Prime Minister Karim Masimov's office over the recent blockages of several opposition and government Web sites. The independent site www.zonakz.net published an open letter detailing the sequence of blockages and asking Prime Minister Masimov if he has anything to do with it. Opposition www.respublika-kz.info covered a press conference by www.zonakz.net Editor-in-Chief Yuriy Mizinov where he claimed that the government -- and Prime Minister Masimov personally -- have an interest in seeing the blockages continue. "Certainly it's not an accusation that you (Masimov) organized the attacks," said Mizinov, "but it is a question you must answer." According to the report, Prime Minister Masimov tasked his staff to look into the attacks, but remained silent about a request to recall from Parliament a recently

ASTANA 00000415 002 OF 002

proposed Internet law that would enhance the government's legal grounds to block websites.

¶18. According to the independent "Vremya" newspaper, the draft Internet law motivated a group of Internet users to form a group to oppose passage of this legislation. The article reports that members of "For a Free Internet" warn that there is "no guarantee" that popular social network sites would not be hamstrung by blockages if the amendments are approved. The group called for all Internet users-- Facebook users included -- to post entries on Prime Minister Masimov's blog voicing objection to the draft law.

"PSEUDO" RELIGIONS RECEIVE STRONGLY UNFAVORABLE COVERAGE

¶19. The pro-government daily "Express K" covered statements by the Deputy Akim (Deputy Governor) of East Kazakhstan oblast, Amankeldi Tazhanov, about the "destabilizing influence" of non-traditional and minority religious groups. Making no distinction between religious adherents and extremists, the article noted Tazhenov's recommendations that the government suspend the activity of two Protestant schools and an Islamic institute.

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